

SELF/PORTRAIT

An Exhibition Statement
Submitted to the
College of Graduate Studies and Research
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
Department of Art and Art History
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

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ABSTRACT

SELF/PORTRAIT is an exploration of the creative process. Based in the genre of portraiture, this collection of work seeks to reveal the ways in which the artist's relationships and circumstances have factored into the creation of the resulting exhibition. This exploration involves the assessment of the artist's abandoned projects with the aim of gaining a greater understanding of their qualities that have served to motivate the creation of his art, and those that have hindered his artistic process.

This thesis exhibition and support paper use an autobiographical approach to seek the elements of the artist's perception of art which have influenced the production of the work displayed, and how these have been effected by the task of creating a Master's thesis exhibition. It explores the qualities of both Portraiture and Painting which have inspired and directed his endeavour. SELF/PORTRAIT seeks to display the artist's work as indicative of the artistic process of creation rather than just the product of it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank by colleagues and friends who have provided me with their support and their influence throughout the creation of this exhibition. The two members of my committee who have been with me since I began the Master's program, Peter Perdue and Tim Nowlin, I thank for giving me space when it was called for, their time and guidance when I needed it most. I would like to thank my first supervisor, Charles Ringness, for his advice and unceasing encouragement throughout my time at the University of Saskatchewan. His support for me has been unfailing since we first met. I would like to extend my sincere thanks Alison Norlen, for taking over the role of my supervisor when time was short and my needs were great. Her generosity and her insights have have exceeded all expectations.

I would like to thank my fellow MFA students for their part in creating an environment that has had a profound impact on my practice. Special thanks to David Folk for countless discussions - informative and entertaining - both in and out of the studio environment.

Last but not least I would like to thank Sharilyn Lee for taking care of me so completely from her station in the Art Department office. With her characteristic positive energy she has bore the burden of every problem I brought to her desk and saved me from countless headaches.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis exhibition to my parents, Glenn and Linda Pilling. My father's integrity and my mother's boundless creativity have inspired me always. Their support of my art has never wavered and I could never have made it this far without them.

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SELF/PORTRAIT

SELF/PORTRAIT tells a story. Although many of the works were created to be narrative in nature, the sort of story I am speaking of is not an exhibition of individual stories. Nor is it an exhibition where the pieces combine to create a collective narrative, although that is how it was originally conceived. This final stage of fulfilling the requirements of my degree has become a story of self-discovery. I am reminded of my grade eleven algebra class, where I went through the year without truly understanding the material I was meant to learn. I could successfully work my way through the given formulas each day, but I did not endeavor to understand their underlying principles. It was only during the final exam when our teacher changed the structures of the equations - from the ones I had memorized into other forms - that I was forced to really think about them. I learned more during the exam than I had during the entire year.

As I neared the final stages of completing my exhibition I came to realize the structured approach I had been following for the last year was insufficient to satisfy my own interests in art. In order to appreciate what this process has taught me I came to the late and seemingly undesirable conclusion that I had to abandon the unifying goal I had been previously working toward. Oscar Wilde's final statements from his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Grey* repeatedly came to mind: "We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless."¹ Although Wilde's statements seem too polarized to account for all of art's potential functions, recalling them incited me to think about the reasons I make art. I have come to recognize that the artwork I had been creating had a distinct use. I had been progressing with the very specific purpose of mounting an exhibition in a gallery and fulfilling the thesis requirements for a Master's degree. This was to entail the formulation of a larger conceptual framework

¹ Wilde, p. 17

that would enable me to create a cohesive exhibition, which I could then defend according to contemporary art theory and the criteria of the Master's of Fine Arts program. Some of the conceptually isolated paintings I had created earlier in the program became a foundation upon which a complex structure for a tight exhibition concept was built. This structure very quickly came to demand exact pieces which would fulfill necessary roles within the exhibition's narrative. With over a year before the show was to be mounted I had already dictated to myself how many paintings were needed and the function they each had to satisfy to resolve my greater concept. I had envisioned the simplicity of working out the final details, such as what the remaining pieces would actually look like, and was left only with the task of constructing them. The intuitive process I have always enjoyed within my practice had been subjugated to the practicalities of producing a highly contrived body of work.

When I began writing this paper my goal was to provide an explanation of my thesis topic and to discuss the ways in which that topic has informed the creation of the work I have displayed in the gallery. It was meant to be a supplement to the artwork largely for the benefit of the defence committee who would be judging it. But during the writing of this paper its goal has changed. The beginnings of this *supplementary* paper began to seem *necessary* to reveal how all the pieces would be conceptually unified. I came to realize I was trying to force the idea to fit the art. More importantly, I realized that while creating the show I had been trying to force the art to fit the idea. The seamless pairing of those two elements may be sincere and natural to other students who have been faced with the same task, but as I verbalized the concept it felt increasingly as though I was forcing together elements that did not complement one another. I could confirm to myself that I have a genuine interest in both the creation of art and the topic I chose, but I began to question why these two elements needed to be unified in my exhibition. More pressing than this concern was a immediate and practical one: even when *I* judged the success of the works I had completed already, I knew the remaining pieces that were necessary to unify the show would expand upon the least successful end of my own hierarchy. It became quite apparent that a reassessment of my artistic values would be the most important element of my experience within the Masters program.

SELF/PORTRIAT is not an exhibition displaying the answer to a query outside of itself, but rather a documentation of one student's exploration *of* self as it pertains to his art. As some of the pieces in the exhibition were created as part of the framework I have since abandoned, the context of this exploration must begin with a brief description of the thesis project I had originally intended.

The Ill-Fated Thesis

The show was to be about the search for truth. One of my primary interests in philosophy and social critique has been Western society's apparent disillusionment with the concept of objective truth.

The novelist Julian Barnes spoke of this concern when he wrote of the study of history:

“We all know objective truth is not obtainable, that when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into history, into some God-eyed version of what 'really' happened. But while we know this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we must believe that it is 99 per cent obtainable; or if we can't believe this we must believe that 43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent. We must do so, because if we don't we're lost, we fall into beguiling relativity, we value one liar's version as much as another liar's, we throw up our hands at the puzzle of it all, we admit that the victor has the right not just to the spoils but also to the truth.”²

I planned to approach this issue by splitting the concept into three strata, which were to deal with truth, or its obstruction, as it applies to the individual, the communal, and the societal levels of my own experience. I had planned to represent each of these in a separate area of the gallery. The “Individual” area was to include four pieces which would each concentrate on a human quality that I consider influential to an individual's perception of truth (my own perception in this case). The four pieces were to represent: Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, and Philosophical. After the completion of the first piece for this area (entitled *Abandon*) I came to enjoy its dual character (see figure 1). I had painted a self-portrait over a collage of pornography, which was meant to speak to my struggle with sexual impulse (the Physical), and how it influences my art and my thinking. My figure was to be read as straddling the boundary between the pleasurable abandon of embracing malesexual desire and the guilt of that desire as it manifested itself in an objectified attraction to the female body. The figure's hand gesture could be

² Barnes, p. 245



Figure 1: *Abandon*, 2007, acrylic and collage on canvas, 60" x 72"

reminiscent of a child covering his eyes to block out a spectacle unsanctioned by his parents, while allowing for a peek through the fingers because of some reckless or shameful curiosity. The piece sought to question the conflict between instinctive human desires and the social regulations we create to keep them in check. Are we denying the truth of our own humanity by creating these social constraints, or is our ability and inclination to constrain our instincts what constitutes humanity? To present this sort of dual character became the additional goal I demanded for each of the paintings in this space.

Self-Portrait Rejecting an Existence In Two Dimensions (see figure 2) aimed to present the Philosophical influence by way of reference to Plato's allegory of the cave. My figure has stepped out of formation with the other two figures in the background who are emulating the poses displayed in the fresco behind them. I depicted myself in the act of rejecting my environment by attempting to climb out of the shallow two-dimensional space of the painting in order to emerge in the real three-dimensional space of the art gallery. The dual character I intended was to be embodied in the fruitlessness of this

action: regardless of how three-dimensional looking I managed to paint my figure, the fact remained that it would only ever be an illusion in two-dimensions. Presenting myself in the act of attaining the level of consciousness Plato spoke of as the ideal may be viewed as quite pretentious, but this was to be neutralized by the notion that it is an ultimately superficial act comparable to those made by my companions in the painting. This unfulfilled desire refers the piece back to the greater topic of truth. It suggests that our disillusionment may be a result of equating the value of an endeavor with the attainment of its ends. We have abandoned our belief in objective truth because we have recognized how impossible it is to reveal its ideal completeness. My figure cannot possibly find its way out of the painting into the gallery, but the inclination for self-improvement and greater understanding is what I consider more important than the achievement of whatever goal inspired the endeavour. It was as I wrote about this



Figure 2: *Self-Portrait Rejecting an Existence in Two Dimensions*, 2007, acrylic and oil on canvas, 68"x38"

notion to describe this one painting that I realized its narrative should actually apply to the approach I was taking to the exhibition itself. By shifting emphasis to my process rather than only viewing my project with respect to the ends it would serve, I came to recognize that I was missing what was most important to my practice.

The majority of the artwork which now constitutes SELF/PORTRAIT was to be in the part of the gallery meant to represent the community. I had decided to display a large group of portraits facing a painting of myself with the intention of having them operate as a single narrative. This collection was to represent the influences of the community upon an individual (again, presenting myself as the individual), and how this dynamic may inform the greater topic of truth. The only requirement I had imposed upon the creation of most of these pieces was that the gaze of each of the portraits would need to be directed toward the self-portrait when they were arranged in the gallery. In hindsight, the inconsequential nature of this one requirement was undoubtedly the reason so many of the pieces have been finished. Conversely, the conceptually loaded self-portrait I needed in order to complete the narrative had been continually postponed and has remained no more than a collection of sketches.

As I tried to find the motivation to fill in the missing pieces of my opus of truth while I worked on this paper, I became increasingly aware that I had lost sight of what I want my art to accomplish. My interest had not been in each painting as an artwork, but rather in the function it would serve to narrate my topic. On the surface, my preference as to the order in which I would complete the pieces appeared to be an arbitrary choice. Ultimately I found that I had intuitively arranged the level of priority given to each project according to the severity of the criteria imposed upon it by my unifying topic. I was not at all inspired to take the most important works beyond the conceptualization of their design. I have since concluded, if my topic is truth it would be far more satisfying for me to write an essay about it rather than allow the attempt to convey it through art result in such a restricted creative process. This document essentially began as that essay. By having concentrated primarily on ideas that can be related far more accurately and clearly in text, it seemed as though the art itself had become an after-thought. The approach I had been taking incited me to ignore the specific advantages of the visual media I have chosen to use, and its qualities which attracted me to it in the first place.

Portraiture

The research of painting that I have done throughout my years of study has included trips to many of the major galleries of Western art. The most profound change in my perception that has resulted from my experience as a Master's student has had to do with a heightened interest and appreciation regarding the physical qualities of the works I view. The knowledge I have accumulated about their creators and the artistic movements they were a part of has become entirely secondary. Previously I found myself walking through entire wings of galleries largely due to a vague sense of obligation to pay homage to the works of art history's most celebrated artists. But as my interest in the work was linked primarily to the content of each painting, I found little reason to linger in front of pieces depicting subjects that I was not very interested in – typically those based on religious themes, landscape, still-life, and indeed most portraiture. With no affinity to the subjects that dominate so much of art's history, most of my time was spent viewing 20th Century and contemporary art in which the content progressively tends toward subjects that I am able to relate to the more current the work is. My experience in the Masters program has incited a complete reversal of that trend. I relate to the artist's use of paint and to his or her approach to its employment in depicting the chosen subject. The masterful techniques of painters who worked in the 19th Century and earlier have become the focus of my research regardless of (and often *in spite* of) the content of their paintings. This shift in my perception has had massive implications within my own approach to painting.

The most obvious consistency in the paintings displayed in SELF/PORTRAIT is that they are all portraits. Although this fact may be seen to unify all the works thematically, it is not so because I have a continued interest in mounting a cohesive or thematic exhibition. For the reasons outlined above, I have come to recognize that I am far too obsessive in my art practice to keep the adherence to a theme from dominating my entire artistic endeavor. SELF/PORTRAIT consists entirely of portraiture simply because it is the genera that I am currently interested in. This notion is particularly relevant because it speaks to a foundational aspect of my practice at present: I do not create art in order to use it as a platform to make any particular statement. This is a use I consider to be very common in contemporary art and it is the use I found myself putting it to with my former thesis project. Each piece has its own topic, but my assumption that a Master's thesis exhibition demanded a distinct unity of topic between each of the works was what led to the problems discussed earlier. My primary interest in painting is the act of painting

itself. It seems equally accurate for me to think of portraiture as the medium I use to explore the process of painting as it is for me to think of paint as a medium I use to explore portraiture: the two elements have become virtually inseparable in my current practice.

The portrait is a subject we naturally relate to, yet will never fully understand due to the numerous expressions a face may reveal, and the uncountable contexts that can inform our interpretation of each one. We are biologically predisposed to *want* to interpret what we see in another's face, and we each have a lifetime of experiences to which we will compare these reactions. With such endless possibilities I do not find it surprising that portraiture has been a consistent part of art's history, nor that I would come to consider it a fertile ground for my own exploration of Painting's unique attributes.

I have always found working with portraiture a challenge. The difficulty of capturing a likeness is what drew me to the genre in the first place and it continues to maintain my interest. But the desire to hone that particular skill has revealed itself to be much like discovering an answer that simply raises more questions. A likeness alone does not encapsulate the individual I mean to portray. A far more complex challenge is that of trying to capture a personality. Not only is it technically difficult to translate an immaterial quality into a visual medium, but it raises questions about the liberties that may or may not be taken by the artist – a topic I will return to later on. When I decided to do a painting of my friend Terry, it was the quirks of his personality distinctly revealed in his mannerisms and clothing that I was interested in portraying. He seemed to be the perfect subject to begin challenging myself with this additional facet of portraiture.

The painting *Terry* (see figure 3) was meant to appear in opposition to much of portraiture's tradition. In *The Changing View of Man in the Portrait*, John Berger defines the aim of historical portraiture:

“The function of portrait painting was to underwrite and idealize a chosen social role of the sitter. It was not to present him as 'an individual' but, rather, as an individual monarch, bishop, landowner, merchant and so on. [...] The satisfaction of having one's portrait painted was the satisfaction of being personally recognized and *confirmed in one's position* [original italics]: it had nothing to do with the modern lonely desire to be recognized 'for what one really is'.”³

As a subject, Terry appears in obvious contrast to this tradition, and I consider this to be particularly succinct due to the traditional techniques I have employed in the creation of the painting. I feel this combination endows the painting with an intriguing tension that may be read by viewers who are aware

3 Berger, p. 100



Figure 3: *Terry*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 60"x72"

of this aspect of portraiture's history. But I do not feel that the success of *Terry* hinges on the viewer's knowledge of traditional portraiture. The sitter appears nervous and uncomfortable, isolated and on display. Viewers may not relate to Terry personally, but we are inclined to empathize with the 'feel' of his circumstances. In this sense, neither the identity nor the status of the sitter is of particular consequence. *Terry* is meant to personify an aspect of human nature that all viewers can relate to.

Mark, another friend and fellow artist, is the subject of a later painting I have called *Clone Plus One* (see figure 4). In this piece I have dealt with both of the aforementioned facets of portraiture, but I have approached them in a completely different way. Mark's expression appears to be one of condescension and arrogance. The viewer's response is more likely to be guarded than empathetic: I have



Figure 4: *Clone Plus One*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 60"x60"

portrayed Mark as someone we would typically prefer to find no affinity with. I began the project with the intention of depicting Mark so entirely integrated with his own painting that the boundary between the art and the artist would be blurred. To this end I have composed my own painting to mirror the dimensions of his piece called *Three Painters and a Clone* which dominates the space behind the sitter. It is not immediately apparent that I have depicted a painting within a painting, and thus his position in front of it initially reads as though he is in the same space as the subjects of his art. Although he did not include a self-portrait within his piece, the “clone” in his title (referred to in labels on the wall within and beside his piece) implicitly refers to his artistic practice as the product of his subject's influence. As Mark has had a far greater influence on my own practice than any other artist, I thought it fitting to repeat many of the visual puns from his work in my portrayal of him, making myself the additional “clone” referred to in the title of this work.

Clone Plus One has three distinct narratives occurring simultaneously. The topic of artistic influence can only be fully appreciated with a privileged knowledge of Mark, his artwork, and my own

relationship with him as a former studio-mate. I cannot expect a viewer to recognize any of these elements. Mark's expression (which has been described as "repulsive" in one critique) is one that I do not consider an accurate representation of his personality. I know that his expression was taken in jest when he posed for my photographic source, but again, this information is not available to the viewer. It was while I considered this fact that I became interested in the notion of the artistic liberties that can, and inevitably will, be taken by a portrait painter. A single image cannot possibly capture the whole of an individual. Regardless of the painter's intentions a process of selection must occur, and even a flawless execution in the painting of this abridged character would not guarantee that the viewer will interpret the resulting image accurately. With this in mind, painting a portrait of Mark specifically seemed to be the perfect opportunity to exercise a different way of interpreting the notion of accuracy in the portrayal of a sitter. As the content of his own work has often involved uniquely twisting the historical paradigms of art to serve his narratives dealing with art itself, I considered it appropriate to mimic this twist by purposefully misrepresenting him. I have depicted Mark in a chair that resembles a throne, positioned so Picasso's arm would read as if it is around his shoulder, and wearing one of his own paintings as a shirt just as the subjects of his painting are. My portrayal effectively raises Mark to the status of a celebrated painter equatable to Mondrian, Close and Picasso: his expression can now be read as one that is befitting of an art star. Rather than have the painting *represent* Mark's personality it seeks to *reproduce* it. I meant to accomplish this by making the painting about the codified symbolism of traditional portraiture and how it relates to contemporary sensibilities regarding art. The former typically includes objects meant to symbolize the sitter's status and interests (for example, the inclusion of a classical sculpture in the image would symbolize the sitter's patronage of the arts). To this end, the wine, cigarette, cheesecake and stereo I have included would be very poor symbolic choices for this sitter, and are as misleading as the apparent status I have given him. But this matters little because the codified symbolism of tradition is irrelevant to the bulk of contemporary viewers whether I have taken liberties or not, which is really the point, and this constitutes the third narrative. It is not the meaning of the symbols that will be noted, but rather their existence within the piece as a reference to the tradition itself. For a contemporary painter, the inclusion of these elements will not serve to describe the sitter: they are a statement by the artist about portraiture. The topic of this painting is 'art' simply because the tradition I am referencing is no longer adhered to. As a result, having the painting itself serve as a 'likeness' of Mark's art was more important to me than depicting him accurately within the contents of the piece.

The fact that *Clone Plus One* requires so much additional information to make sense of its visual

presentation was the reason I was not surprised by the cold reception it received in its initial critique. Although I am quite proud of its composition from a conceptual perspective (which is by far my most complex and considered one to this day), I also recognize that its chaotic visual impact does nothing for it aesthetically. It is this judgement which ultimately informed my decision to abandon the remaining pieces that were needed to complete my former thesis project, as they required similar compositions to relate their topics.

If I am to consider the obscurity of topic in *Clone Plus One* to be its weakness, I was faced with the opposite problem in my following portrait. I was fully aware from the onset of painting *Marthe* (see figure 5) that contemporary concerns regarding the representation of a young woman by a male artist would be in full effect. The history of portraiture's symbolism may be lost to contemporary viewers but the history of male artists objectifying female subjects is at the forefront of contemporary art theory. When painting portraits of male subjects I could do so with no concern as to whether the paintings or the sitters were physically attractive. *Marthe* is attractive, so the challenge I was faced with was how I could go about painting her portrait without the topic of the piece necessarily becoming *about* this facet of art's history. I simply rejected the notion that I would have to specifically make the painting unattractive aesthetically in order to avoid having the critique of this piece center on a topic that I did not intend for it. To this end I painted the whole piece in rich, glowing colours, but in the portrait itself I attempted to deglamorize the sitter by draining her skin of colour except for red around her eyes and nose. Although I



Figure 5: *Marthe*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 42"x24"

consider it to be a successful painting and an accurate portrait of Marthe, in its critique it was still perceived as an overly glamorous depiction of a female subject by a male artist. At the time this judgement incited the encouragement of my peers to embrace this issue by exploring it in subsequent work. But it had been my intention to paint Marthe's portrait *without* the gender issue being raised, precisely because I was not interested in making my art about that topic. It is an issue that would undoubtedly make for an interesting body of work, but I was already beginning to feel as though I was allowing my practice to become too much about topic and too little about painting.

Even though it was somewhat frustrating whenever a critique revealed that my work was not being received the way that I had intended it to be, it has ultimately served to remind me that I work in a visual medium that is not an exact form of communication. By trying to control the way that each piece would be perceived I was limiting the degree to which I could respond to the medium itself during the process of painting. I find it amazing that one brush-stroke can change the expression on a portrait, and this can, and typically will, change how the entire painting will be read. Choices of composition, colour, paint-handling, lighting – any and all issues of material and form – effect the portrait and are effected by it. These kinds of nuances are what keep me fascinated with portraiture even if each piece seems to be created by a process of trial and error. Gao Xingjian writes in *Return to Painting*:

“The artist's aesthetic of creation cannot rely on explanations; all it can do is set its own limits, direct its own ascent, step-by-step, hoist itself up high enough to see into the distance and steer personal creation in the right direction. Such a theory stems from the creative experience; it depends on unmediated contact rather than deduction. It deems structured theories inadequate, and above all else, it seeks out the impulse that would enliven emotion and awaken intuition so that the artist can enter into creation.”⁴

Xingjian's call for an artist's work to “set its own limits” is precisely what I feel my practice was missing. The uncertainty that is present during the creation of an artwork is, for me, what makes the process enjoyable. This element of mystery is extended further when the individual perceptions of my viewers are taken into account. I can feel certain that a painting will illicit an intended response, but without exception this feeling of certainty proves to be inaccurate. In the past I had typically considered this notion a shortcoming and would try to regain control in subsequent artwork, but acting on this inclination has often lead to disaster. To actively embrace this uncertainty has revealed itself as the approach which has lead to, what I consider, my most successful artwork.

4 Xingjian, p. 17

Painting

I have come to recognize a consistent element in works by the artists I am most drawn to: none of them *depend* on intellectual reflection on the part of the viewer for the work to be appreciated. My appreciation will always grow as I study the works of Paul Fenniak or Kevin Sonmor for example, but when viewing a piece by either painter I am interested in it aesthetically at first sight.⁵ As a consequence of this personal preference, I have found myself to be far more interested in Aesthetics as a branch of philosophy than I am in contemporary art theory. The later is presently dominated by Postmodern theory which largely denies the existence of universals.⁶ Conversely, Aesthetics seeks to discover elements of personal taste that appear to be universal even if they are initially based on individual (subjective) judgements. My aforementioned interest in the topic of truth was undoubtedly a consequence of this preference. I have come to find that it is far more constructive for me to apply my interest in universals to aesthetic elements in my art rather than to it's content.

Aesthetic concerns began to occupy my mind when I recalled the difference in how two of my paintings had been received during their initial critiques. They were two pieces I had intended to be the beginning of an earlier series based on the depiction of friends and acquaintances who have had an influence on me and my art. *Clone Plus One*, which I have already discussed at length, was the second (and last) piece of this endeavor. The sitter for the first painting is a friend I had lived with in London who produces political documentaries. Ishmahil's perspectives on foreign policy and the media were what constituted his influence on me, and were therefore what I concentrated on in *Ishmahil* (see figure 6). I have painted his portrait over a collage of newspaper headlines dealing with foreign conflict, and have attempted to present him with a sense of "raw" visual honesty – a term and guideline he adheres to in his approach to making documentaries. When I began the project I used the newspaper clippings and the principle of his approach to his own medium merely as starting points that I hoped would effect the act of painting his likeness. Beyond using these elements as a foundation, my process was entirely based on aesthetic concerns. The formal limitations while working on the piece that resulted from this criteria amounted to that of finding the ideal opacity of paint which would reveal the portrait without covering the collage.

5 Although "aesthetic" is a term often linked to "beauty," I use it in the broader sense of dealing with visual elements that interest us intuitively and inform our judgements of taste.

6 As was the concern of Julian Barnes with regards to Postmodernism's effect on History noted in my earlier citation.



Figure 6: *Ishmahil*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 84"x60"

Ishmahil and *Clone Plus One* were based on the same conceptual criteria. If aesthetic judgements are to be considered too subjective to take into account, *Clone Plus One* should be the superior painting in every way I can objectively measure. Yet the critical receptions of each painting could hardly have been more opposed to this conclusion. In that environment it seemed as though any discussion about *Ishmahil* was unnecessary, whereas discussion about *Clone Plus One* was a necessary series of attempts to reveal what went wrong. I was intrigued to find these judgments were immediate and no appeal to the conceptual similarities could change the outcome. I found the majority of comments regarding the formal attributes of *Clone Plus One* to be unconvincing, yet I could appreciate them as being founded on something real. I chose to present Mark the way I have for the reasons I have stated earlier, yet I could only agree that his look changed the *feel* of the piece dramatically. Although I had spent far more time and effort considering the formal and conceptual elements of *Clone Plus One* than I had spent on *Ishmahil*, I too prefer the later, if for no other reason than because I think it simply *looks* more appealing. The problematic nature of accounting for what is absent in *Clone Plus One* does not imply to me that the missing quality is irrelevant. That quality is quite obviously of utmost importance.

I consider a two-dimensional work of art to possess a distinctive paradox: its content can be both immediately seen and slowly discovered. A painting will not change itself as we observe it, but our perceptions of it will continually change as we relate what we know to what we see. When a piece is driven by its content or concept we may not lose anything integral about the experience by viewing a reproduction of it, or even by having it explained to us rather than viewing it at all. I do not need to see Duchamp's *Fountain* to appreciate its message: his use of a "ready-made" makes that point clearly. But when viewing Tony Scherman's giant encaustic portraits *in person* I am gripped from the first instant in a way that cannot be reproduced in any other medium or circumstance. To eventually discover it is a portrait of Napoleon dressed in drag or Anthony Hopkins acting the part of Hitler is of little consequence, for the time being. In that moment those facts are as necessary to me as recognizing one of Rembrandt's pieces as a self-portrait, or understanding the historical reference in *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* by Paul Delaroche. Eventually I may find myself interested in those elements as I have proven to be more often than not. But when viewing these works I instantly find it impossible to imagine that *anyone* could judge them as less than masterpieces even before their content is fully absorbed. Far too often I find that deconstructionist theory implies that the "value" of such work is inexorably linked to the politics of its time, or that our continued interest in them may be a consequence of their inclusion within the canon of



Figure 7: *Degen*, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 84"x60"

Western art. In my experience, to arrive at such conclusions can only seem reasonable if we are not standing in front of the work itself as we do so.

The above observations are quite obviously subjective in nature. It would be virtually impossible to argue their validity by appealing to any sort of objective principles of art. As we have seen, the Modernist attempt to create a rigid structure for dealing with these qualities resulted in the Postmodernist aversion to such unfounded generalities. I make these statements simply because they give context for the primacy to which I concentrate on the elements of painting that can only be recognized when viewing the work in person. It is in the difference between the immediacy of viewing a painting in person and the distant nature of viewing a reproduction of it (or being told about it) that I place the greatest 'value' of painting as a medium. In the painting *Degen* (see figure 7) I was specifically interested in recreating the warmth of the lighting which is, for me, so integral to the conversational atmosphere at her kitchen table. As a friend of the sitter I was also particularly interested in trying to capture the expression of calm intensity typical of Degen in her approach to these conversations. But it is the scale of the painting (7x5 feet) that was meant to counter the viewer's inclination to read it as merely a photographic snap-shot of someone they do not know. I felt a small painting would incite the viewer to relate this image to snapshots of his or her own: by increasing its scale I am asking for the viewer's recognition of an *atmosphere*. I consider this response to be far more likely when the image dominates the viewer's field of vision while standing in front of the painting.



Figure 8: *Self-Portrait With Cigarette*, 2007, acrylic on board, 24"x24"

Self-Portrait With Cigarette (see figure 8) is the smallest and, in terms of content, the most straight-forward painting I have included in the exhibition. I based the painting on a candid photo I took which I found conducive to intimately close cropping in order to eliminate the need to consider the background. The flash had brightened my irises to such a degree that I considered the image particularly ideal for the vivid colour palette I had intended to use. It was executed as an study in order for me to experiment with a variation on my normal approach to paint application. Throughout my time in the Master's program I have been using the Renaissance technique of 'glazing,' which is to apply each colour in layers of varying transparency. This usually involves 'building' each of the colours with successive layers, and results in a more luminous finish than is typical – especially when using acrylic paint. I had found that when working on the hair in previous portraits, the small ridges of paint I had used to define groups of hairs often resembled hatching – a technique normally used in drawing and printmaking. In this piece I painted the entire portrait by cross-hatching each layer of transparent colour so that they would remain largely separate on the surface, but would optically blend from a distance. As a consequence I find that the success of this work depends upon the viewer having the ability to vary his or her viewing distance from the object itself: the experience is a necessarily immediate and visual one.

When the writing of this paper incited me to abandon working on my earlier thesis project, I decided to include *Self-Portrait with Cigarette* as part of the exhibition. I had not considered it previously because it would not have fit well into my earlier narrative. But as the exhibition has come to be an exploration of self as it relates to the creative process, the inclusion of a self-portrait made as a study for experimentation with paint suddenly made sense. I also considered it appropriate to have this

piece displayed on the title wall in SELF/PORTRAIT since the notion of a “study” implies that it is part of a larger work in progress, and thus this painting is analogous to the narrative of the exhibition itself.

When the nature of my thesis project changed I was left with enough time to complete one more painting before the exhibition would be mounted. No longer bound by the necessity of having the piece fulfill any particular narrative function, I felt free to revisit an earlier project. I had done a study for a painting of local artist Arthur Brown (see figure 9), but it had worked out so well that I did not consider it a priority to do the subsequent 'more finished' piece. It had been the first painting for which I used the glazing technique that I would continue to use for the remainder of my time in the program. For this reason the piece constituted a 'break-through' in my practice, but at that point my tendency was to depend on the direct use of local colours which I would later make efforts to only arrive at indirectly. My experimentation with colour in *Self-Portrait With Cigarette* had revealed a new extent to which I could push the boundaries of non-local colour, and so I used its palette as my initial template while painting *Arthur* (see figure 10). Arthur's hair and beard provided me with the ideal opportunity to expand upon the cross-hatching of vivid colours in order to indirectly arrive at those which would optically blend from a distance and read as a natural palette for a portrait.



Figure 9: *Arthur (study)*, 2006, acrylic on board, 48''x24''

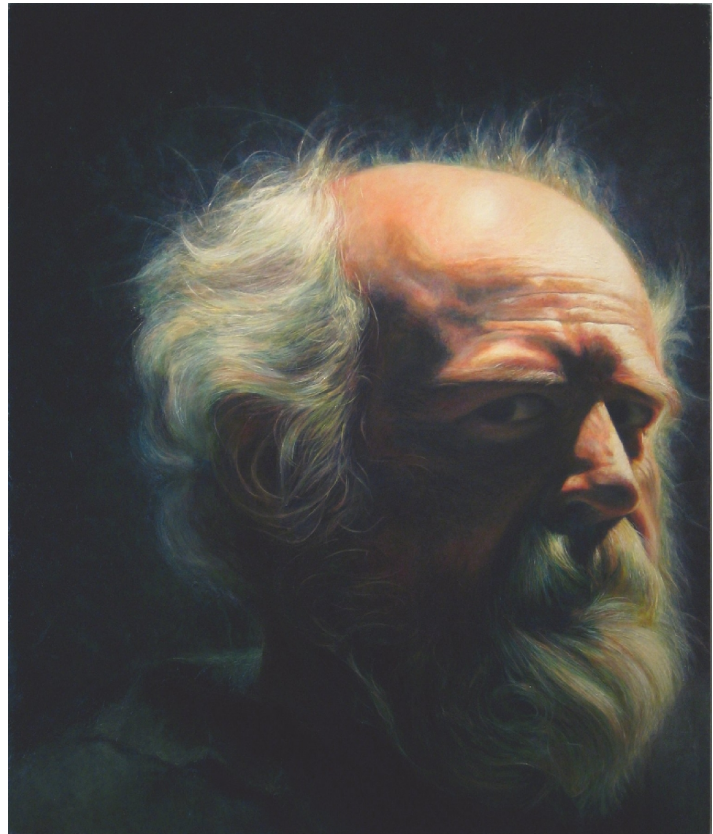


Figure 10: *Arthur*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 72''x60''

While painting *Arthur* I made a specific effort to obscure the contemporaneous nature of his clothing. I did so because the sitter's appearance is a particularly timeless one: it would be as reasonable to interpret this portrait as a depiction of a figure from the Old Testament as it is to recognize him as Arthur Brown. It is also reasonable to think that his look will still be common two hundred years from now. I have done this to combat the one quality about traditional portraits that reduces the affinity I might have with their content – the subjects are most often presented as specifically belonging to a time and place that I cannot relate to. The elimination of these elements can be seen as a strategy I have taken to increase the likelihood of viewers relating to his expression universally. To this end I have also depicted him with an look that is familiar but not easy to interpret without context. It may be one of recognition that he is being scrutinized or he could be the one who is scrutinizing the viewer. He may be plotting a devious act or sensing such intent in the person that is he is looking at. By reducing the portrait to such a basic form of human communication, I have tried to eliminate my own control over how the painting will be interpreted. The viewer's response to the content of this piece should be the same whether or not I am known to be the artist, and regardless of the time and place of the painting's creation. I am calling for the viewer to bring their own narrative to the work. In this way my role as the artist is counter to the one I have taken in many of the other works on display in SELF/PORTRAIT. I have done so to mirror the reversal in my own perception of art that has come about as a consequence of my time in the Master's program, and from the reassessment of my artistic aims that has resulted from the experience of mounting this exhibition.

Conclusion

When viewing the permanent collection of graduate works at the Royal Academy during a recent trip to London, I noticed that each of its graduates submit only one piece for exhibition. This incited me ask myself which one of my paintings I would have selected if this program were to also call for only one piece. But this question requires another to be answered first: what criteria would I use to judge the paintings in order to decide which one is my most successful or which is the most representative of my practice? A seemingly pointless hypothetical question reveals the root of the concerns that I have been dealing with throughout the exploration described here: a single representative piece would be difficult to ascertain because my artwork is not about any one thing, nor is this exhibition.⁷

⁷ As I have stated earlier: the fact that the work is all based on portraits is circumstantial.

The question appears to be a useless one for a current Master's student to ask because we have replaced the concept of a “masterpiece” with a Master's exhibition. This shift in the ends to which we work toward appears to reflect a shift of importance from the objects we create to the aims for which we create them. But I have found myself wondering if this potential change in direction is something that I should concern myself with. The thesis topic I have abandoned had been developed in order to equalize all of my work by giving each piece a necessary role in the exhibition in spite of their differences. Although this approach was sound in theory – in practice it became an entirely too restrictive structure for me to create the kind of work that fuels my artistic interests. What I had initially found to be attractive about such an approach was that it allowed me to explore both painting and portraiture in a variety of ways... but to what end? Knowing that I would be writing this paper and discussing the work at length in the defence made *Clone Plus One* and *Self-Portrait Rejecting an Existence in Two Dimensions* ideal works for inclusion in the exhibition. While writing about them I had to consciously limit their descriptions to keep from unbalancing this document in favour of those two pieces even more than I have. Both paintings are *meant* to be talked about as much or more than they are meant to be viewed. If the criteria I would use to answer my hypothetical question depended on the extent to which I could talk about the painting, *Clone Plus One* would easily be my most 'successful' work. Indeed, those pieces that I had conceived of but discarded along with my 'ill-fated thesis' were designed to satisfy that same criteria. But having decided against their creation reveals yet another variable within the question: who's criteria am I trying to satisfy? Quite obviously those discarded projects were not going to satisfy my own. As content as I am with *Clone Plus One* as a painting, I would not want it to be considered representative of my practice. I have included it and *Self-Portrait Rejecting an Existence in Two Dimensions* as part of the exhibition because their creation was necessary for me to appreciate the depth of my interest in aesthetic quality.⁸

I had always assumed by default that it would be the criteria of the defence committee to which I should adhere. I also assumed that their judgements would favour discussion of topic over the aesthetic concerns of each piece. Even the term “defence” implies a discussion based on some form of objective criteria, thus to concentrate on the purely visual qualities of my work appeared to be entirely too subjective for the circumstances. But the act of catering to these assumptions has served to reveal to me the “limits” Xingjian has advised an artist to set for his work. Whether this revelation was incited by inaccurate assumptions or not, I have since found the extent to which I can subjugate the intuitive process

⁸ Furthermore, their critical receptions have implied the same interest in my peers.

involved in the act of painting to the practical nature of a project's goal. I cannot place less value on the immediacy of the material nor the experience involved when viewing the objects themselves simply because these innately visual qualities are less conducive to a precise and articulate discussion.

I have arranged the work displayed in SELF/PORTRAIT into two loosely defined areas. A viewer has described the works in one end of the gallery as “mythic.” *Abandon*, *Ishmahil* and *Arthur* exemplify the ineffable quality he was trying to articulate, *Terry* and *Degen* as well but to a lesser degree. They are compositionally simple, yet grand in scale. They are about light and colour – about the paint itself – as much as they are about the subject. They suggest a story but do not demand any specific interpretation. *Abandon*, *Ishmahil* and *Arthur* do not give any overt indication of time or place, nor any specific context regarding the artist or siter.

If I were to venture an answer to my hypothetical call to select a single piece for exhibition, it would be one of the above five paintings. But any choice, by any criteria, must be made on the assumption that the importance of the work displayed is goal oriented. This is not true of SELF/PORTRAIT, so I abstain from answering my own hypothetical question. The value that I have found in the task of creating a Master's thesis exhibition is not in the *product* but in the *process* of it's creation.

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